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## Rereading *Vineland*

### — An Essay on Its Figural Dimensions —

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Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* (1990) has been generally interpreted as an allegory of certain significant political and social events in the history of the United States. This point of view, however, does not address the ambiguities in the novel's narrative, such as, for instance, "Why is the villain defeated by two characters that have no connection to him?" and "Why is the reunion of the main character and her mother presented only briefly?" In this essay, I approach these issues in terms of the figural dimensions of the novel's language, an area that has yet to receive full discussion.

I focus on the structure of the story based on certain specific metaphors used, such as "dog," "tree," and "car." The interrelationships among these figural images articulate the seemingly obscure narrative of the novel. The significance of this structure depends on specific contexts in *Vineland*. I aim to demonstrate that *Vineland* has its own internal structure independent from extratextual reality.

### Introduction

Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*<sup>1)</sup> has been generally interpreted as an allegorical narrative about certain political and social events in the history of the United States. The novel's plot is very simple and common that it may disappoint those who have read some of Pynchon's formidable works including, for example, *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). It is understandable that some reviewers, based on their previous knowledge of Pynchon's work, may have altered their original opinion of *Vineland* in order to defend it. As David Cowart, in one of the earliest treatises on the novel, resolutely states, *Vineland* is never a greater work than *Gravity's Rainbow*, and that Pynchon "has not stood still as a maker of fiction" (3). The general consensus among interpreters of *Vineland* is that the novel is much more practical and rooted in reality than Pynchon's previous works.

This interpretation, however, does not account for the ambiguities found throughout the narrative of *Vineland*. Why does Brock Vond, an evil government official, and one of the main antagonists, die abruptly? Why does the long-awaited reunion of some of the main characters turn out to be highly frustrating? These questions have been raised but never truly answered without attributing them to the "Pynchonesque whimsy" (Hayles 27). If *Vineland* was written in order to convey to its readers a message through its narrative, why does the novel have to be ambiguous? These questions have put into question *Vineland*'s status as an allegory, and the message Pynchon was supposedly trying to convey.

This essay's first task, therefore, is to uncover *Vineland*'s relationship with reality, or, to put it more simply, interpret the novel by taking into account the figural dimensions of its language. Despite the presence of undoubtedly political themes such as the

student movement of the 1960s and the counter-conservative tide of the 1980s, *Vineland* cannot be taken as a history-based work, at least in the simplest sense of the word, owing to the presence of overtly supernatural elements such as living-deads and ninjas. These elements alone suffice to differentiate the novel from that of a simple chronicle of political history. In this essay, I also focus on another important aspect of the novel, that is, the role that several specific figures play in the unfolding of the narrative. Do these figural elements serve to establish some kind of correspondence between the novel and the social and political situation it supposedly represents? I discuss these issues in the following sections.

### I. Conspicuous Flaws in the Ending

The manner in which Brock Vond (who, driven by his obsession with Frenesi Gates, has been exercising oppressive force over the revolutionaries since the 1960s) comes to be defeated is highly implausible. While his death is told to most certainly occur, the text does not expound on its details. In the last chapter, Brock was hanging from a helicopter with a rope tied around his waist in an attempt to abduct Prairie. However, after receiving an order from his boss, he is suddenly pulled back up without the girl by the helicopter pilot. He gets into the helicopter empty-handed and flies away, only try once again to capture Prairie. *Vineland's* text does not yield enough information on events that must have taken place during this unauthorized action of Brock. The character reappears in another scene seemingly without any clear awareness of how he got to this situation :

Brock had been vague over the phone about how he'd started off in a helicopter and ended up in a car. He hadn't been aware of any transition. . . . He felt in some way detached, unable to focus or, oddly, to remember much before he found himself at the wheel of the failing, unfamiliar car. . . . (378)

We can only surmise that Brock is already dead at this

point without knowing it; he has become a "Thanatoid," the so-called living-dead described to be "like death, only different" (170). We do not witness the scene of his death, which leads us to suppose that his long-awaited punishment has finally come.

Even more perplexing, Brock is carried away and sent into the underworld by Vato and Blood, two characters who are the unlikeliest to undertake a task of such importance. Apart from the fact that they have served in the Vietnam War, no other description of these characters' direct involvement with Brock is mentioned in the narrative. Yoshihiko Kihara rightfully notices this omission, mentioning that "there are no details given describing how Vato and Blood have come to bring malice to Brock" (132). Kihara, at one point, suggests that perhaps Vato and Blood have been asked to perform this task by Takeshi Fumimota (a Japanese who, as Brock Vond's double, was once nearly killed by DL), although Kihara hardly insists upon this hypothesis. Given their prior history, the subsequent partnership between DL and Takeshi may seem strange and unlikely; however, it is forged by their common goal of exacting retribution against Brock, also a main concern for most of the other characters.

Another frustrating point in the novel is the story of Prairie's journey to find her mother, Frenesi, which fails to achieve a satisfying ending. "The Mother situation" (367) unfolds as a minor episode, unlike Prairie's conversation with Weed Atman. Weed is a former mathematics professor who was assassinated in the late 1960s through Brock's plotting and Frenesi's betrayal, and who now wanders around Vineland County as a Thanatoid :

He looked so forlorn that by reflex she took his hand. He flinched at her touch, and she was surprised not at the coldness of the hand but at how light it was, nearly weightless. "Would you mind if I . . . came and visited, now and then, you know, at night?"

"I'll keep an eye out for you." In fact they were soon to become an item around Shade

Creek . . . Weed would stuff himself with bucket after bucket of popcorn, Prairie would show him secrets of pachinko, seldom if ever would either talk about Frenesi, whom Prairie had managed at least to meet. (366)

Whereas the story of Prairie and Weed is not only depicted impressively but also linked to the description of what will happen afterwards, the reunion of Prairie and Frenesi lacked any kind of dramatic effect. In one scene, a direct conversation between mother and daughter is broken up by the overjoyed grandmother, Sasha, after which “the Mother situation” is then referred by Prairie only briefly: “She’s lookin’ for anger, but she’s not getting’ it from me” (375).

## II. Hidden Structure of the Figures

The issues regarding the far-fetched victory over Brock, as well as the frustrating reunion of Prairie and Frenesi, are but a few of many. Another issue with this novel is that it is, on the whole, articulated on the basis of other well-known narrative structures. For instance, several critics have suggested that the relationship between Prairie, Brock, and Frenesi is parallel to, or even a deliberate parody of, that of Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader, whose relationship is all too soon revealed in George Lucas’s *Star Wars* trilogy (part of which, according to the novel, has been filmed near Vineland County).<sup>2)</sup> Certain aspects of *Vineland*’s narrative structure also have similarities to the story of the prodigal child (in this case, Prairie), along with her departure, initiation, and return: a character who, for some reason, lives apart from her parents and who then finds an ally (in this case, DL, who helps Prairie to overcome trouble). These narrative elements are what Joseph Campbell identifies as basic elements of the mystic narrative (Campbell 49–192). With this narrative structure, insightful readers could easily anticipate that Prairie will struggle difficulties in her quest to find her own identity as a heroine. Her achievements—her victory over evil and reunion with her mother—become a focal point around which other

events in the novel are organized.

Before we can fully address the issue of the hidden structure of the figures, we have to look into another aspect of the novel—the underlying rhetorical structure of *Vineland*. It contains several rhetorical patterns throughout the development of its narrative, and a comprehensive exploration of these patterns would go beyond the limits of this essay. Instead, I will only point out crucial patterns that have significantly influenced the events we have already discussed. We begin with the figurative “tree” or “wood,” which, Kihara notes, is used throughout the narrative as a metaphor for certain characters and events involving Weed Atman and the literal lumber that falls upon the union organizer (and Prairie’s great maternal grandfather) Jess’s enemy, as if in retribution (168–70). Another figurative element used in *Vineland* is the concatenation between “wood” and “human,” which is exemplarily employed in the description of Prairie’s character. Prairie cannot be exclusively defined merely as the central point around which the novel revolves and develops; even as a baby, she is already shown to possess extraordinary abilities. For instance, when Zoyd moved to Vineland County to take refuge from Brock Vond, she, then still an infant, could already hear the voices of trees as if they were human beings:

Trees. Zoyd must have dozed off. He woke to rain coming down in sheets, the smell of redwood trees in the rain through the open bus windows, tunnels of unbelievably tall straight red trees whose tops could not be seen pressing in to either side. Prairie had been watching them all the time and in a very quiet voice talking to them as they passed one by one. (315)

This scene plays an impressive role in introducing Vineland County as the last bastion of the mystic in the United States. It is even more impressive that it is Prairie who can talk to both trees and humans, allowing us to anticipate her dealing with Weed Atman, who in the text is also a figurative “wood,” having been the “key log” in the student revolt at

College of the Surf. Thus, the characteristics of Prairie and Weed are equally associated to the figurative “wood” or “tree.”

However, the figurative “tree” extends beyond the description of these two characters. We can also apply the figure to “Vineland the Good” and Japan—the former a legendary land fading away and protected by the redwood tree; and the latter, a country where human trafficking is rampant and which is said to have bought up “unprocessed logs as fast as the forests could be clear-cut” (5). Japan, in *Vineland*, is where wood and humans are equally trafficked, a clear contrast with “Vineland the Good,” where Prairie and Weed equally stand for the figurative “tree.”

When juxtaposed with “wood,” metaphors for “cars” also characterize the intervention of Vato and Blood toward the end of the novel. Readers would remember the two cars that appear, clearly anthropomorphized by their respective drivers: DL’s Plymouth, “Felicia,” and Rex Snuvvle’s Porsche, “Bruno” (134; 230). In *Vineland*, parking lots are also frequently the space where separation and encounter take place (9–11; 54–55; 105–06; 134–35). Within these associations of automobiles and humans, Vato and Blood appear. Their “legally ambiguous” (44) business—towing cars without authorization then blackmailing their owners for money—can be easily associated with kidnapping. A crucial part of our inquiry is recognizing that Vato and Blood also serve as an intersection for the figurative associations between cars and humans and trees and humans. As Vato and Blood explain their business to Takeshi and DL:

The boys, when Takeshi and DL had appeared in their headlight, had been “scaling” the cars in this lot, as timber scalers will go through a piece of forest to estimate how many broad feet of lumber it contains. Their task would seem to’ve been straightforward—simply choose, for towing away, the highest-priced rides first. (177)

An implicit structure consisting of several tropes remotely related to each other exists behind the

eradication of Brock Vond by Vato and Blood, and Prairie’s encounter with Weed. This structure can be shown as:

wood : Prairie — Weed

car : Vato and Blood — Brock

At least one more figurative element remains to be discussed, which is “dog.” Prairie’s dog Desmond, whose importance has not passed unnoticed, is chased away during the assault upon their home, sent wandering around Vineland until he finally comes back to his master. Desmond’s journey makes it hard not to celebrate, despite all the ominous details, a happy ending of the novel:

... Sunday morning [was] about to unfold, when Prairie woke to a warm and persistent tongue all over her face. It was Desmond, none other, ... roughened by the miles, face full of blue-jay feathers, smiling out of his eyes, wagging his tail, thinking he must be home. (385)

This scene makes one recall the epigraph from Johnny Copeland: “Every dog has his day, and a good dog just might have two days.” Have we now reached, as if in a full circle, the stage where Pynchon’s message is finally disclosed? At least up to a point, an allegorical interpretation of Desmond’s journey as a secret but reliable justice is persuasive. The justice implied in Copeland’s epigraph seems certainly achieved with Desmond’s day.

The figurative “dog” could also be linked to yet another character in the novel. Readers would remember that Brock Vond is also nicknamed “Mad Dog Vond” (347) in *Vineland*. This association may seem strange, but is, by no means, unnatural. For those who consider the epigraph more deeply, it is possible to equate “dog” with human and see this as a kind of allegory; for those who look into the epigraph only literally, the figure “dog” would mean almost nothing. In the novel, the epigraph acquires a signifying function, which is to provide a hopeful vision for life and the future. On the other hand, it could also have an ominous implication. If we consider the entire epigraph—not only the latter half—

more deeply, we would see that it in no way promises salvation of the forlorn, nor the triumph of the right. "Every dog has his day" means that man's prosperity has nothing to do with his being good or evil. This is exemplified in the case of Brock, a bad "dog," who has luckily escaped assassination by DL.

The figural dimension of *Vineland* is not limited to these three figures, nor are these figures mutually exclusive. This is not only because these figures are not necessarily incompatible or mutually exclusive, as characters such as Brock can simultaneously be a figurative "dog" and "car," but more importantly because a rhetorical reading of this kind requires us to suspend the differences among the natural properties of these figures, in this case, among those of "tree," "car," and "human." In other words, we will understand the ambiguities of the narrative not by assuming a hidden chain of cause and effect, but by taking into account the rhetorical forms or figural structures in which the characters are described. This is equivalent to saying we should be indifferent to the distinction between the figural and literal meaning of the language of *Vineland*, the same way we have treated Weed Atman as a "tree." Additionally, we should read the novel again in its entirety, paying attention to the figural diction of the text. For example, the analogy between the orbital motions of planets and the retribution of divine justice found in the passage from R. W. Emerson (369) can be juxtaposed with the correlative polarities of morning and night, light and darkness, and reality and dream. A further expansion of this essay would lie in this direction.

### Conclusion

The uniqueness of *Vineland* is that here, the function of the figures is not limited to a secondary, ornamental one. On the contrary, they lead to the occurrence of important events. It is not surprising that the unfolding of the narrative seems at first implausible. Each pair of figures such as "tree" and "human" serves as some kind of resemblance or analogy and not just a formal,

purely linguistic function. Although it is not difficult at all to imagine a dog's attributes to associate it to a human, the figures in *Vineland* also establish an independent structure. The formal consistency in the figural dimensions of the novel's characters is another aspect that brings unnaturalness to its content.

This makes us wary of simple allegorical interpretations of *Vineland*. An allegory is usually understood as a work created to convey a hidden abstract meaning or idea through more specific characters or events. If this is the case for *Vineland*, the figures in the text, in principle, represent ideas in empirical reality. However, our reading reveals that the figural structure of the novel is not only purely linguistic but rather dependent on the context, and that the connection among the figures such as "dog," "tree," or "car" is valid if and only if they are read together in the text. Another way of stating this is that the novel means nothing but itself when read as correctly and thoroughly as possible. This is why the relationship between *Vineland* and what it supposedly represents is complex to a considerable degree.

### Notes

- 1) In this paper, "Vineland" or "Vineland County" refers to the fictional place in the novel, not the actual city in New Jersey.
- 2) See Safer (49) and Kihara (112–18) who share a similar interpretation of the relationship between Prairie, Brock, and Frenesi.

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## 『ヴァインランド』再読 ——その修辭的次元への考察——

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トマス・ピンチオン『ヴァインランド』（1990）は主に、アメリカ合衆国の政治的・社会的状況の寓話として解釈されてきた。しかしこのような視点は、作品の物語の曖昧さを完全には説明できない。悪役はなぜまるで無関係の登場人物によって打倒されるのか？主人公とその母との再会がなぜ極めて短く描かれるのみなのか？本稿は、こうした問題に対して、これまで看過されがちであった『ヴァインランド』の修辭的次元からアプローチするものである。

本稿は特に、作中で用いられる特定の比喩（「犬」、「樹木」、「自動車」）が構築するテキスト内の構造に着目する。これらの比喩形象の相互連関が、一見不可解な作品の物語を組織している。こうした構造は『ヴァインランド』の特定のコンテキストに依存する純粋に言語内的なものである。したがって本稿は『ヴァインランド』が、作品外の現実からは独立した内的構造を持つことを示す。